String Analysis for Binaries

Mihai Christodorescu
Nicholas Kidd
Wen-Han Goh

University of Wisconsin, Madison
What is String Analysis?

- Recovery of values a string variable might take at a given program point.

```c
void main( void )
{
    char * msg = "no msg";
    printf( "This food has %s.\n", msg );
}
```

Output: This food has no msg.
Why Do We Need String Analysis?

- We could just use the `strings` program:

```
$ strings no_msg
/lib/ld-linux.so.2
libc.so.6
...
...

no msg
This food has %s.
$
```
Why Perform String Analysis?

- **Computer forensics**
  Given an unknown program, we want to know the files it might access, the registry keys it might get and set, the commands it might execute.

- **Program verification**
  SQL queries, embedded scripting, ...
A Complicated Example

```c
void main( void )
{
    char buf[257];
    strcpy( buf, "/" );
    strcat( buf, "b" );
    strcat( buf, "i" );
    strcat( buf, "n" );

    ...  
    system( buf );
}
```
A Complicated Example

```c
void main( void )
{
    char buf[257];
    strcpy( buf, "/" );
    strcat( buf, "b" );
    strcat( buf, "i" );
    strcat( buf, "n" );
    ...
    system( buf );
}
```

Running strings:
/ a b c d ...

A Complicated Example

```c
void main( void )
{
    char buf[257];
    strcpy( buf, "/" );
    strcat( buf, "b" );
    strcat( buf, "i" );
    strcat( buf, "n" );
    ... 
    system( buf );
}
```

Running strings:
```
/ 
a b c d ...
```

Running a string analysis:
```
/bin/ifconfig -a | /bin/mail ...@...
```
Our Contributions

- Developed a **string analysis for binaries**.
- Implemented **x86sa**, a string analyzer for Intel IA-32 binaries.
- Evaluated on both benign and malicious binaries.
Outline

- String analysis for Java.
- String analysis for x86.
- Evaluation.
- Applications & future work.
String Analysis for Java

Christensen, Møller, Schwartzbach "Precise Analysis of String Expressions" (SAS’03)

1. Create string flowgraph.

```java
void main( void )
{
    String x = "/";
    x = x + "b";
    x = x + "i";
    x = x + "n";
    ...
    System.exec( x );
}
```
1. Create string flowgraph.

```java
void main( void )
{
    String x = "/";
    x = x + "b";
    x = x + "i";
    x = x + "n";
    ...
    System.exec( x );
}
```
2. Create context-free grammar.

```
A1 → “/” “b”
A2 → A1 “i”
A3 → A2 “n”
A4 → A3 “/”
...```

```
concat
“/”
```

```
concat
“i”
```

```
concat
“b”
```

...
String Analysis for Java [2]

2. Create context-free grammar.
3. Approximate with finite automaton.
From Java to x86 executables

Java .class → Flowgraph → CFG → FSA
From Java to x86 executables

Rest of this talk:
Bridge the syntactic and semantic gaps between Java and assembly language.
Outline

- String analysis for Java.

- String analysis for x86.

- Evaluation.

- Applications & future work.
Four Problems with Assembly

1. No types.

2. No high-level constructs.

3. No argument passing convention.

4. No Java string semantics.
Problem 1: No Types

- Solution: infer types from C lib. funcs.

Assumption #1:
- Strings are manipulated only using string library functions.

char * strcat( char * dest, char * src )
- After: “eax” points to a string.
- Before: “dest” and “src” point to a string.
Problem 1: No Types [cont.]

- Perform a backwards analysis to find the strings:
  - Destination registers “kill” string type information.
  - Libc string functions “gen” string type information.
  - Strings at entry to CFG are constant strings or function parameters.
Problem 1: No Types [example]

String variables:

- after the call: \{ eax \}
- before the call: \{ ebx, ecx \}

eax = _strcat( ebx, ecx );
Problem 2: Function Parameters

- Function parameters are not explicit in x86 machine code.

```assembly
mov ecx, [ebp+var1]
push ecx
mov ebx, [ebp+var2]
push ebx
call _strcat
add esp, 8
```
**Problem 2: Fn. Params [example]**

```
move cx, [ebp+var1]
pushe cx
move bx, [ebp+var2]
pushe bx
call _strcat
add esp, 8
```
Problem 2: Fn. Params [example]

Stack pointer

mov ecx, [ebp+var1]
push ecx
mov ebx, [ebp+var2]
push ebx
call _strcat
add esp, 8
Problem 2: Fn. Params [example]

movecx, [ebp+var1]
pushecx
movebx, [ebp+var2]
pushebx
call_strcat
add esp, 8
Problem 2: **Fn. Params** [example]

```assembly
mov ecx, [ebp+var1]
push ecx
mov ebx, [ebp+var2]
push ebx
call _strcat
add esp, 8
```
Problem 2: Fn. Params [example]

Stack pointer → push ecx
               push ebx

mov ecx, [ebp+var1]
push ecx
mov ebx, [ebp+var2]
push ebx
call _strcat
add esp, 8
Problem 2: Fn. Params [example]

```
movecx, [ebp+var1]
pushecx
movebx, [ebp+var2]
pushebx
call `_strcat`
add esp, 8
```
Problem 2: Fn. Params [example]

Stack pointer

```
mov ecx, [ebp+var1]
push ecx
mov ebx, [ebp+var2]
push ebx
call _strcat
add esp, 8
```
Problem 2: **Function Parameters**

- **Solution:** Perform forwards analysis modeling x86 instructions effects on the stack.

```assembly
mov  ecx, [ebp+var1]
push ecx
mov  ebx, [ebp+var2]
push ebx
call _strcat
add esp, 8
```
Problem 3: **Unmodeled Functions**

- String type information and stack model may be incorrect!

Assumption #2:

“_cdecl” calling convention and well behaved functions

- Treat all function arguments and return values as strings.
Problem 4: Java vs. x86 Semantics

- Java strings are immutable, x86 strings are not.

```java
String y, x="x";
y = x;
y = y + "123";
System.out.println(x);
```

=> “x”
Problem 4: **Java vs. x86 Semantics**

- Java strings are immutable, x86 strings are not.

```java
String y, x="x";
y = x;
y = y + "123";
System.out.println(x);
```

```c
char *y;
char x[10] = "x";
y = x;
y = strcat(y,"123");
printf(x);
```

=> "x"

=> "x123"
Problem 4: Java vs. x86 Semantics

• Solution: May-Must alias analysis.

0x200: _strcat( ebx, ecx )

“May alias” relations:
Problem 4: Java vs. x86 Semantics

- Solution: May-Must alias analysis.

0x200: `_strcat( ebx,ecx )`

“Must alias” relations:
x86sa Architecture

libc char* func’s

Alias Analysis Transformers

IDA Pro → Connector → WPDS++ → JSA

EXE
x86sa Architecture

UTF-8 func’s

Alias Analysis Transformers

IDA Pro → Connector → WPDS++ → JSA

EXE
x86sa Architecture

Unicode func’s

Alias Analysis Transformers

IDA Pro -> Connector -> WPDS++

EXE

JSA
Intraprocedural Analysis Summary

1. Recover callsite arguments.
   (stack-operation modeling)

2. Infer string types.
   (backward type analysis)

3. Discover aliases.
   (may-, must-alias forward analysis)

✓ Generate the String Flow Graph for the Control Flow Graph.
Outline

- String analysis for Java.
- String analysis for x86.
- Evaluation.
- Applications & future work.
Example 1: simple

```c
char * s1 = "Argc has ";
char * s2;
char * s3 = " arguments";
char * s4;
switch( argc ) {
    case 1: s2 = "1" ; break;
    case 2: s2 = "2" ; break;
    default: s2 = "> 2"; break;
}
s4 = malloc(strlen(s1)+strlen(s2)+strlen(s3)+1);
s4[0] = 0;
strcat( strcat( strcat( s4, s1 ), s2), s3);
printf( "%s\n", s4 );
```
Example 1: String Flow Graph

Our result:
"Argc has 1 arguments"
"Argc has 2 arguments"
"Argc has > 2 arguments"
Example 2: \texttt{cstar}

\begin{verbatim}
char * c = "c";
char * s4 = malloc(101);
for( int i=0; i < 100 ; i++ ) {
    strcat( s4, c );
}
printf( "%s\n", s4 );
\end{verbatim}
Example 2: String Flow Graph

Our result: c*
Correct answer: c^{100}
Example 3: Lion Worm

- Code and String Flow Graph omitted.

- x86sa analysis results:

  "/sbin/ifconfig -a|/bin/mail angelz1578@usa.net"
Future Work: Interprocedural Analysis

1. Inline everything and apply intra-procedural analysis.
2. “Hook” intraprocedural String Flow Graphs into a “Super String Flow Graph”.
Future Work: Relax Assumptions

- Relax the assumptions:
  - Strings can be manipulated in many ways.
  - Calling conventions can vary in a program.

- **Value Set Analysis** looks promising:
  - Identifies “variables” based on usage patterns.
Future Work:
More Applications

• Malicious code analysis

• Analysis of dynamic code generators:
  - Packed programs
  - Shell code generators
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Mihai Christodorescu
Nicholas Kidd
Wen-Han Goh

University of Wisconsin, Madison
{ mihai, kidd, wen-han }@cs.wisc.edu